

S T R I C T U R E S

ON

DR. EDWARDS'S

S E R M O N.

By G. A. THOMAS, M. A.

[PRICE ONE SHILLING.]

T

By

Sed
runt an
certum
definire

PR I

6
*The Predictions of Christ and the Apostles concerning
the End of the World.*

S T R I C T U R E S

ON A

S E R M O N,

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE,

MAY XXIII, M.DCC.XC.

By THOMAS EDWARDS, LL.D.

By THE REV. G. A. THOMAS, M.A.

RECTOR OF WOOLWICH, KENT.

Sed ut experientia docuit, errâsse quotquot finem mundi assignârunt ante nostrâ tempora; ita nihil certius statuendum de iis, qui certum aliquem annum, vel in hoc seculo, vel in sequentibus, præcisè definire audent.

Turretini de Consummatione Seculi Quæstio, p. 653:

L O N D O N :

PRINTED FOR J. JOHNSON, NO. 72, ST. PAUL'S
CHURCH YARD.

M.DCC.XCIII.

I

dio

is r

was

reli

apoc

for

iron

com

whic

the f

A

be ra

and

inger

that

Decl

best k

surely

INTRODUCTION.

IT seems very doubtful whether the cause of christianity has been more injured by perfidious friends, than by avowed enemies. There is no doubt, however, that as it's divine Author was betrayed by a *kiss*, so his pure and perfect religion has been frequently betrayed by an *apology*. This species of infidelity was reserved for the refinement of modern times. The gross irony and coarse buffoonery of former ages comport not with the delicacy of the present, which rejects every thing that is not polished to the fashion.

Amongst the Apologists for Christianity may be ranked the celebrated author of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Whether this ingenious historian designed, at the same time, that his elaborate work should comprise the Decline and Fall of the Christian Religion—is best known to his own comprehensive mind. But, surely, the particular account of Christianity,

which he has interwoven with his general history, almost authorises the conjecture. Had this accomplished historian possessed a due veneration for the awful truths of a religion which is the most worthy of the Creator, as being most conducive to the happiness of his creatures, he might have contributed no less to the benefit, than to the information of mankind, by an unprejudiced account of it. But, unhappily for his admirers, “ he has contrived to weave into his narration one continued sneer upon the cause of Christianity, and upon the writings and characters of it’s ancient patrons*.”—That such an author should have admirers is not at all wonderful, since his luminous and methodical pages have thrown light and order upon subjects the most obscure and perplexed. With every requisite to form the complete historian, profound and various erudition, discriminating judgment, exquisite taste, and perspicuity of style, this writer has indisputable claim to the admiration of the classical reader. But the same philosophic eye which has penetrated the mists of ob-

* See Paley’s Philosophy, p. 395. 4to.

security, in exploring the records of ancient times, and enabled him to discover truth from falshood in every other subject, distorted by prejudice, has viewed the objects connected with the Christian cause in the most contemptuous light, and has led him to treat of it with the most disparaging insinuations. It might be supposed, however, that, as prejudice is so evident in that part of the history which contains an account of Christianity, judicious and impartial readers would carefully separate the dross from the surrounding ore. But the fascinating charms of a celebrated author are apt to stamp upon all his opinions indelible characters of truth; and the mind of the most judicious reader is liable to be warped by prejudices that are supported by arguments of the most subtle and ingenious kind, especially where any congeniality of mind, or any propensity to the same prejudices is discoverable. It would scarcely be possible, on any other grounds, to account for a learned divine's embracing, with seeming avidity, the prejudices of this eloquent historian.

The Author of the Sermon on which the fol-

Following Strictures are written, possessed of a strong and elegant mind, cultivated with laudable diligence, and stored with various knowledge, but warped by prejudice, and swayed by the illusions of fancy, seems to have so blindly adopted the religious sentiments of his favourite historian, as to pay more reverence to his authority, than to that of all other human writers, and almost than to the sacred historians themselves. —The truth of this assertion will appear in the following Strictures.

STRICT-

STRICTURES, &c.

IT has been already observed, that the accomplished writer of the sermon, which is the subject of these strictures, is swayed too much sometimes by the illusions of fancy. The justness of this observation will be evident by observing the manner in which the awful name of Jehovah is introduced into his elegant Sermon. " But the deep-rooted jealousy, and implacable aversion, which Jehovah entertained towards the most harmless and trivial rites of the Pagan superstition, would be yet more reasonably extended to the seductive powers of their eloquence; and may induce us to adopt some different characteristics as the criteria of an inspired language.—If the expressions of Jove were clear and determinate, the expressions of Jehovah would be obscure and ambiguous :—if
the

if the conceptions of Jove were arrayed in the charms of unaffected elegance, and graceful simplicity, the conceptions of Jehovah would be overwhelmed by the gaudy trappings of daring metaphors, extravagant hyperboles, and intricate constructions :—if Jove spoke in the flowing smoothness of the Attic modulation, Jehovah would speak in the concise harshness of the Hellenistic barbarity.” (See Sermon, p. 2, 3.)

This unseemly mention of so sacred a name I am charitably inclined to attribute more to the illusions of fancy, than to any want of reverence for so hallowed a Being. Our critic seems so enamoured of classic literature, in which taste and imagination are so constantly gratified, that, in the habitual gratification of these, he models his language by that elegant standard, and appears not always to distinguish sufficiently between sacred and profane subjects. This apology we candidly offer both for the introductory and subsequent pages of his extraordinary Sermon.

It is remarked by our learned critic, that “ a bare inspection of the numberless comments, which have been written on the New Testament, a bare recital of the endless controversies, to which it's doctrines have given birth, will abundantly convince us that perspi-

cuity at least cannot with any justice be enumerated amongst the gifts of the Spirit :—that if the obscurity of these writings cannot properly be denominated a considerable error, it will be readily acknowledged to be a considerable *imperfection* :—an imperfection, which has more deeply wounded the real interests of christianity, than the most artful machinations of it's most inveterate enemies :—which has inflamed the minds of Christians with such hatred towards each other, that they have inflicted on their brethren the most atrocious cruelties with less remorse, and greater triumph, than they ever experienced from the zeal of Infidels : (See Gibbon, Vol. II. p. 495)—which has tempted many to apostatize from the faith, as concluding that a religion could not have God for it's author, which had excited such dissensions and animosities amongst men. The mild spirit of toleration, which has at length penetrated into the most civilized countries of Europe, will prove, we trust, an insuperable obstacle to a repetition of similar enormities : it cannot, however, be observed without some mixture of concern, that though the powerful remedies of learning and criticism have repeatedly been applied to determine the controversies, which have been agitated in the Christian world, yet all hopes of success appear utterly groundless, unless unanimity should

should be effected by a supernatural influence, or a new revelation vouchsafed to elucidate the former.”—(Sermon, p. 7—9.)

But, surely, this sagacious reasoner has, in some measure, mistaken the effect for the cause. It is not so much the obscurity of the sacred writings that has caused such numberless comments upon them, as those numberless comments have caused that obscurity. For it is a trite observation, that a multiplicity of commentators rather obscure than elucidate an author, as the desire which every commentator has to make an author speak his own language, gives so many meanings to almost every sentence, that the spirit of the author evaporates into forced and unnatural conceits. This observation, with respect to the evangelical writings, is confirmed by experience; since those who have perused the simple text without the perplexity of comments, have collected the sense of it without difficulty.

But with regard to the obscurity observable in some parts of the evangelical records—it ought to be ascertained how far this obscurity is conducive to the wise purposes of it's all-wise Author; and how far obscurity is designed by those writers which have received such unbounded praises from classical readers, before it be considered an imperfection. It is well known
the

the sacred writings have answered the gracious purposes for which they were designed, and therefore the objection of obscurity, though numberless other reasons were omitted, must be of the least consequence. But if compared with examples of the best heathen models, it will appear of no validity at all. Whoever has carefully perused the works of Plato, Aristotle, and especially Thucydides, must have observed frequently a designed ambiguity and a studied obscurity.—Amongst the earliest sages, obscurity was deemed so essential a part of wisdom, that they invented a method of expressing their thoughts which was unintelligible by the vulgar, and therefore the use of hieroglyphics was established among the Egyptian philosophers.

And as for the style of the sacred writers—the supreme authority of the Lawgiver should sanction the use of such modes of speech, whether plain or figurative, as he conceived best expressed his awful meaning. And though the construction of sentences were not perfectly graceful or elegant, yet would the sacred writings be not the less venerable, it being the authority of the Lawgiver, and not the beauty of the language which makes all laws obligatory. Nor is it any wonder that obscurity should be found in these ancient writings, when, at the distance only of about seven hundred years from their
being

being enacted, we perceive the eloquent Cicero confessing his ignorance of some parts of the laws of the twelve tables, owing to their obscurity*, which were, doubtless, perspicuous at the time they were written, but became obscure not by themselves, but by the change of customs and manners.—For which reason it may be fairly concluded, that the obscurity is less in the writings than in the circumstances attending them—less in matters of faith, than in ourselves. For we are told in scripture, that “the secret of the Lord is with them that fear him: and he will show them his covenant.”—(Psalm xxv. 14.) Obscurity of style is so far from being thought an imperfection by critics of the exactest taste, that it is esteemed no mean beauty. The reason of which is, that those passages which are at first difficult to understand, when well understood, are better relished than such as are plain, and afford no scope to the imagination; for the pleasure of conquering a difficulty in a sublime passage, which is obscure from the very genius of the composition, is always more permanent than that which is received from a care-

* Cicero de Legibus, Lib. ii. To this purpose, in A. Gell. Lib. xx. C. 1. Nam longa ætas verba atque mores veteres oblitteravit, quibus verbis moribusque sententia legum comprehensa est.

less perusal. This observation is intended for intelligent readers (the ΣΥΝΕΤΟΙ), who will readily perceive it's peculiar application to the sacred writings, the necessary obscurity of which, being only such as the nature of the subject occasions, affords the finest exercitation of the reasoning faculty. And those who have objected to the occasional obscurity of the scriptures ought to consider, whether the subjects there treated of could have been written in a more popular and perspicuous style than we find used by the sacred writers, or in a style more suitable to their character and design. But so unreasonable is the objection which we are considering, that as many have objected to the simplicity and perspicuity, as to the obscurity of the sacred records.

“ Tres mihi convivæ propè dissentire videntur,

“ Poscentes vario multum diversa palato*.”

To attribute the atrocious cruelties which have been practised by false zealots to the genuine spirit of christianity, is to deny the authority of that voice which proclaimed, “ Peace on earth, good-will towards men.” The real causes of these enormities having been so repeatedly urged

* Hor. 2 Ep. ii. 61.

with

with such irresistible force of evidence, it would be superfluous to add a word on a subject so successfully pre-occupied by the ablest casuists. It is, however, hence evident, that, if they had been any prejudice to Christianity, they would not have been so plainly foretold by its author; who, it must be allowed, would, in common prudence, forbear to mention any circumstance that was detrimental to his own religion. But to impute the cessation of these enormities to the "mild spirit of toleration," is not to trace effects to their causes. What but the genuine spirit of Christianity is the cause of this toleration? To be convinced of this, we need only consult the records of ancient history, and we shall find that toleration never existed, even in name, before the promulgation of Christianity. In reading the History of ancient Rome, we cannot but remark how widely the author of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire differs from the most authentic historians. It is said by the former, that the emperors of Rome "beheld, without concern, a thousand forms of religion subsisting in peace under their gentle sway *;" while the latter record the severest prohibitions against any innovations in the esta-

* Gibbon's History, Vol. II. p. 519.

blished religion of their country *. And if this mild and benign spirit of toleration does not breathe in the legislation of Rome, we shall in vain expect to find it in the less perfect legislation of any other country in the ancient world. And as for the controversies which still agitate the Christian world, they need not any supernatural influence to determine them, since it must be the fault of those who are concerned in them, if they be not managed with a temper suitable to the benevolent precepts of the gospel. Nor do these controversies so darken the revelation which is vouchsafed to us, as to require another to elucidate it. An idea this is, which seems totally inconsistent with a proper sense of revelation, the authority of which must be considerably diminished by repetition. God having afforded us sufficient evidence that the revelation which he vouchsafed to bestow upon us comes from him, expects to be credited upon his word, and will not gratify the curiosity of men

* Vide Liv. L. iv. C. 30. "Datum inde negotium aedilibus, ut animadverterent, nequi nisi Romani Dii, neu quo alio more quam patrio colerentur." Ibid. L. xxxix. C. 16. "Sacrificulos vatesque, foro, circo, urbe prohiberent, vaticinos libros conquirerent, comburerentque, omnem disciplinam sacrificandi præterquam more Romano abolerent." Vide Tacit. Annal. L. xi. C. 81. Ibid. L. xiv. C. 30. Vide etiam Valer. Max. L. i. C. 3.

who disbelieve it. Nor can the obscurity in some parts of revelation, properly considered, be any imperfection in that system, the Author of which was declared to "open his mouth in parables, and to utter dark sayings of old."—A declaration which ought to silence the clamour of those whose voices are only heard in objections. It is a sufficient reason for some parts of revelation being obscure, that, if they had been more clearly revealed, the purposes of revelation would not have been answered so perfectly as they have been. To enumerate the causes of obscurity in the language of revelation, would be to re-echo the sayings of many inquisitive and successful writers on that subject, and would have as little novelty in it as the repetition of the objections which have been so repeatedly answered. And as for that unanimity which is supposed of sufficient consequence to be effected by a supernatural influence;—it by no means appears to be either promised or designed by the gospel, but would counteract the very design of revelation, and the methods of God's wisdom in his dispensations for the salvation of men.

I. I shall now proceed to the consideration of the other charge alledged, by our Critic, against the writers of the New Testament—namely, that of "considerable error."

The

The first passage produced by Dr. E., in support of his charge of considerable error, is Matt. xvi. 28.: "Verily I say unto you, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Our critic raises two objections to the understanding this of the destruction of Jerusalem. The one is, that by detaching this verse from the former (which certainly can only be applied to the universal judgment,) we not only transgress an important rule of criticism, but we "thus make our Saviour foretel what was by no means true,—that they should *see* the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Sermon, p. 15.)

In answer to the first objection, that by detaching this verse from the former, we transgress an important rule of criticism—which is delivered in the 14th page: "That whenever the same word is used in the same sentence, or in different sentences not distant from each other, we ought to interpret it precisely in the same sense; unless either that sense should involve a palpable contradiction of ideas, or the writer expressly inform us, that he repeats the word in a fresh acceptation."—We reply, that this rule, important as it may seem, is imperfect when applied to the sacred writers, since they will be frequently found to use the same word in a to-

tally different sense when applied to different subjects ;—the change of subject therefore may authorize a change of the sense of a word ; it ought therefore to have been added—or unless there is a change of the subject. And sudden transitions are not uncommon in the New Testament. A very strong argument why this verse should be detached from the preceding, is, that St. Mark and St. Luke seem to detach it by the particles used in the introduction—see Mark ix. 1. Luke ix. 27.—particularly the latter, by the forcible particle *but*.

The other objection is, that “ we make our Saviour foretel what was by no means true :—that they should *see* the Son of Man coming in his kingdom : since, as an ingenious writer has very justly observed (Theol. Repos. Vol. VI. p. 188.), Christ was no more visibly present at the destruction of Jerusalem, than at the earthquake of Lisbon, or the siege of Gibraltar.” (See p. 16.)

The validity of this objection depends entirely upon the doctor’s literal interpretation of the phrase, “ Ye shall *see* the Son of Man,” &c., and may be thus completely refuted by a collation of the Evangelists. In St. Luke our Lord declares to the surrounding multitude, “ But I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste death, till they see the kingdom

kingdom of God (Luke ix. 27.). And in St. Mark, it is added, "come with power." Now whatever may be the sense of the phrase, *kingdom of God*, it is evident there can be no personality annexed to our idea of it. When we utter the second petition in the Lord's prayer, we do not expect any visible appearance of the *kingdom of God*: and as *the Son of Man coming in his kingdom*, must be admitted a parallel expression, we cannot, by parity of reason, expect any visible appearance by "the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." The objection therefore to the word *see* is unworthy so learned a critic as Dr. Edwards. And, if no stronger arguments can be adduced, I see no reason why we should not adopt the sense which the context and the best critics give us of this passage.—That not all those to whom our Saviour was speaking, should die before they saw a demonstration of the establishment of the Messiah's kingdom by his providential appearance for the destruction of Jerusalem, frequently called, the coming of the Son of Man—alluding at the same time to the miraculous propagation of the gospel by the effusion of the Holy Ghost.—Certainly it must be allowed, there is a great *verbal difference* between the *Son of Man coming in his kingdom*, and coming in the glory of his Father with his

angels"—“ to reward every man according to his works.”—

II. The next passage adduced by our Critic in favour of his hypothesis—that the Apostles expected and predicted that the end of the world would be immediately subsequent to the destruction of Jerusalem—is, Matt. xxiii. 39. “ Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.”—Our Critic explains this passage of the destruction of the world, or the Universal Judgment, and objects to interpreting it of the destruction of Jerusalem—that the same signal catastrophe (of Jerusalem) did not influence the Jews to acknowledge the Messiah.—To this it may be answered, that, as it is impossible, at this very remote period, to ascertain precisely what number our Saviour designed to include in this prediction, or how many of the Jews or Gentiles were converted by the evidence of the wonderful events that preceded this great catastrophe—so it is utterly impossible for any man to prove, that this prediction did not receive its completion. A perusal of the second chapter of the Acts may be sufficient to satisfy any unprejudiced reader, that our Saviour’s words were exactly verified according to his intention.

An insuperable objection against understanding this prophecy of the final dissolution of all things

things is, that, if that had been designed, it would have been impossible for any conversion of the Jews immediately to succeed the Messiah's coming, as they would have been involved in sudden and irresistible destruction; and could not, as on another occasion, (when, upon Lazarus's being raised from the grave, they acknowledged Christ to be their temporal deliverer) on beholding the desolation of their devoted city, repeat the joyful acclamation—"Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord"—in acknowledgement of a spiritual Saviour.

In further support of his hypothesis, the learned critic cites the xxivth Matt. He observes (Sermon, p. 24.) that "the 30th verse seems strongly to oppose, if not irrefragably to confute, the opinion that this passage may be referred to the destruction of Jerusalem *."—For my own part, I see no irrefragable confutation of such an opinion in any thing here advanced. Nothing but a literal interpretation of this passage can render it applicable to the great day of retribution: for, if it be compared with other parts of Scripture, it will evidently appear not inapplicable to the destruction of Jerusalem and

* This opinion is very ingeniously supported by a gentleman of equal candour and learning, Mr. Nisbett, in answer to Dr. Edwards. The Answer is sold by Johnson, White, and Payne, London.

the Jewish polity. The sudden and irresistible destruction of Jerusalem, and the Jewish state, is similar to that destruction which indicates almighty vengeance, and is often expressed by God's coming in the clouds. In Psalm civ. 3. God is said to make "the clouds his chariot." In Isaiah xix. 2. "Behold, the Lord rideth on a swift *cloud*, and shall *come* into Egypt."—And xxvi. 21. "For behold, the Lord *cometh* out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity." In all which places the words *coming*, and *the clouds of heaven*, cannot be literally interpreted, though the prophecies were perfectly accomplished. Nor is there more reason why Christ's coming to destroy Jerusalem, and subvert the Jewish polity, should be a visible and personal appearance, than God's coming to take vengeance should be so. With regard to the sign of the Son of Man appearing in heaven, the celestial appearances described by Josephus, Bell. Jud. Lib. 6. Cap. 31, and Tacit. Hist. Lib. 5. §. 13., illustrate the propriety of referring this prophecy to the destruction of Jerusalem. An almost irrefutable reason against interpreting the 30th verse of the final dissolution is, that any prediction of future judgment is contradicted by the 35th verse—"Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." Had this passing

away

away of heaven and earth (parallel to St. Peter's description of the dissolving elements) no further meaning than was contained in the preceding parts of the prophecy, this verse would have been tautological.

Our learned critic gives us the following excellent analysis of this difficult chapter.

“ By comparing St. Luke with St. Matthew, we discover that the two questions of the latter relate entirely to one subject:—the first to the time, when the vengeance was to be inflicted:—the second to the signs, which were to precede its execution.” (Sermon, p. 21.)
 —From this analysis we should be inclined to think Dr. Edwards designed to confine this prophecy to one event—the destruction of Jerusalem, had he not observed in p. 18. of his Sermon, that “ in this chapter a prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem is entangled with an apparent or real prediction of the approaching dissolution of the world.”—This contradiction Dr. Edwards seems to have been betrayed into by literally interpreting a few expressions in the chapter now under consideration, and into his subsequent conclusions by the same mode of interpreting similar expressions in the epistles. In order to give a readier solution to the difficulties arising from this literal interpretation of
 figura-

figurative language, it may be proper to inquire, how far the expressions in question admit of being literally interpreted.

The first phrase, in the explanation of which our critic seems to have erred, is "the end of the world," in ver. 3., and, "the end is not yet," in ver. 6., and again, "and then shall the end come," in ver. 14. of Matt. xxiv. On which phrases Mr. Locke has left us the following very accurate observations.—"It is certain that *τέλη* and *συνέλεῖα τῶν αἰώνων*, or *τῶν αἰώνων*, cannot signify every where, as we render it, *the End of the World*, which denotes but one certain period of time; for the world can have but one end, whereas those words signify, in different places, different periods of time, as will be manifest to any one who will compare these texts where they occur—Matt. xiii. 39, 40. and xxiv. 3. and xxviii. 20. 1 Cor. x. 11. Heb. ix. 26.—" (Locke's Works, Vol. III. p. 181.)

Another phrase is, *the coming of the Son of Man*, ver. 24. Dr. Edwards, throughout his Sermon, seems to understand this phrase to mean a visible appearance of the Son of Man.—To omit other proofs, one may suffice from the following verse of the same chapter—"For where the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together;"—from which it is evident, that the phrase "coming" must have the signification
of

of taking vengeance upon the Jews whithersoever the Roman standard (*the eagles*) was born, which the most authentic histories inform us was completely executed upon that exiled and devoted people. Great stress is laid upon the word *see*: which even in this chapter cannot be taken literally, it being used in ver. 33. in a much greater latitude than that of beholding an object with the bodily eye.—“So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things,” &c. Now in “all these things” are included the signs, in the preceding verses, descriptive of the threatened destruction, and which cannot all be objects of vision. I am aware, indeed, that the rule of criticism delivered in the former part of the Sermon, is not much regarded here, nor does it appear necessary. For it seems much more reasonable to suppose that the Evangelists wrote in the language of nature, than of critical precision. Nor does it appear very respectful to the great Author of language, to prescribe rules for the revelation of himself to his creatures.

It certainly is not necessary always to refer “the coming of the Son of Man” to the final judgment, since in St. John it must be referred to the destruction of Jerusalem. “Jesus saith unto him, if I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?” chap. xxi. 22. And the reason why there is no parallel account of this prophecy

prophecy in St. John seems to be, that it was accomplished before his gospel was written, and therefore required no particular account.

Dr. Edwards makes some remarks on the particles *then* and *for*, in the next chapter, which, he says, connect that with the preceding. But he wholly omits the mention of the particle *but* in the 36th verse of the xxivth chapter. This particle is surely as strong a disjunctive, as the others are copulatives. I should therefore conclude, that the prediction more immediately relating to the end of the world begins here (though it may be alluded to in several other parts of the chapter), especially if we consider the emphatic meaning of "that day"—a phrase corresponding to the "great and remarkable day."—Compare 2 Tim. i. 12. 18. and iv. 8.—To this it may be objected, that what follows in the 40th and 41st verses cannot be admitted to belong to any prediction of the last day. It is evident, however, that there may be a transition in the following verse, from this prediction to that concerning Jerusalem. This transition seems to be made by the particle *but*, in ver. 37.

To corroborate this opinion, it ought to be observed, that our Saviour designed not to predict the exact period of the end of the world, since, in ver. 36, he seems to declare, that it was no part of his mission to announce the time of the

the final judgment. And Christ expressly prohibits curiosity in such inquiries—Acts i. 7.

To this opinion Dr. Edwards objects, that “to suppose that at the 36th verse, the day of judgment is introduced as a period distinct and distant from the subversion of the Jewish polity, is to suppose either that our Saviour prophesied, or that the Evangelist wrote, without any regard to propriety or connection.” (Serm. p. 23.) But this objection is founded upon a supposition, that propriety and connection are here both violated, which he has not even attempted to prove: nor has he proved that the prophetic style is confined to the same rules as any other. A very strong presumption against this prophecy’s containing more than an allusion to the day of judgment is, that this awful event is not annexed to the description in the other Evangelists of the destruction of Jerusalem: and therefore it may fairly be supposed, that there are two distinct prophecies recorded by St. Matthew, in the 24th and following chapters.

III. I shall now proceed to consider the passages adduced from the Epistles. The first passage adduced by our critic in the epistolary writings is, 1 Theff. v. 4. “But ye, brethren, are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief.”—On this passage we find the following remarks—“That theologians have entirely

entirely misapprehended the design of the paragraph. Because St. Paul assures his brethren, that the coming of Christ was not at hand, they have rashly represented him as informing them that it was therefore at a considerable distance; and as one mistake generally leads to another, they have considered the prophecy of the Man of Sin as describing a system of spiritual corruption, which began to operate in the earliest ages of the Church, and which the revolution of seventeen centuries has not been able to dispel."—It will not, however, be candid to charge all preceding theologians with misapprehension of these points without examining them.—On the context we may make this preliminary remark, that the Apostle designed not to acquaint his Thessalonian converts with the time of Christ's coming to judgment—"But of the times and seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you." (ver. 1.) It was rather his design to exhort them to a diligent preparation for that important day, which, with respect to every individual, must always be said to be "near at hand."—That the Apostle cannot reasonably be supposed to have expected that day to be near at hand, or even approaching (except in a peculiar sense, or in comparison of thousands of years with eternity) is hence evident. "Let no man deceive you by any means, for that day shall not come, except

except there come a falling away first, and that Man of Sin be revealed, the Son of Perdition." (2 Theff. ii. 3.) In order to support their opinion, those who pretend, that the Apostles were in a considerable error with regard to the final dissolution, find it necessary to give this text such a sense as may imply the prophecy to have been long since fulfilled.

An insuperable objection to this interpretation, or to any other than that of a distant event is, that Anti-Christ was to appear by slow degrees, at first working iniquity so secretly as not to be perceived, until the obstacle which hindered him should be removed (2 Theff. ii. 7.). It is observed by the learned Mede, in the apostacy of latter times, that *αποστασία*, or apostasy, means a defection from Christianity to Idolatry: consequently the interpretation which Dr. Whitby gives of this prophecy, referring it to the rebellious and unbelieving Jews, must be erroneous. But our critic seems to have founded his opinion, that the apostasy here spoken of "must have sprung up and arrived at its maturity within the compass of a few years," upon the authority of Grotius, whom he quotes on this occasion. Great as the authority of that eminent theologian may seem, his arguments are by no means invulnerable.

Grotius

Grotius supposes, that by the Man of Sin is to be understood Caius Caligula. But in this supposition there is such an anachronism as must greatly invalidate, if not totally destroy, the whole system of his reasoning. By this hypothesis the Apostle is made to prophecy of a person already dead, his Epistle having evidently been written under the imperial government of Claudius Cæsar, the successor of Caligula, as appears from Acts xi. 28. and from the Epistle itself, Chap. ii. 5. So gross an error must render the opinion of any man untenable. And while this single testimony is held forth to us, which we have proved to be fallacious, we have the concurring authorities of Tertullian, St. Chrysostom, St. Augustine, Turretine, Limborch, Tillotson, &c., beside the experience of the best living commentators, who daily witness the gradual progress of this prophecy towards its final completion.

The passage, which has already engaged so much of our time, is said “ expressly to contradict a favourite hypothesis of the celebrated Dr. Taylor; which supposes that the time of Christ’s coming is represented in scripture as coincident with the time of our death. (On the Romans p. 355.)

This assertion is founded upon an expression of St. Paul, “ I die daily.” (1 Cor. xv. 31.

It is thus paraphrased by Mr. Locke—"As to myself, I am exposed, vilified, treated so, that I die daily, i. e. I am so exposed to contempt, cruelties, and dangers, that my life is in jeopardy every day."—What connexion this expression of the Apostle's danger can have with the lingering sickness or gentle decay by which a considerable portion of the human species terminate life, I am at a loss to conceive. Nor do I see much reason in the observation, that "it is far from being the case, that the death of individuals comes upon them as a thief." (Sermon, p. 31.) The sudden appearance of our Lord in the destruction of Jerusalem, when he found mankind immersed in business and pleasure, may be applied to his appearance at the final judgment (of which the former was an awful emblem) when, in all probability, he will find the men of that generation engaged in the like manner, so that they shall perceive themselves overwhelmed with inevitable destruction, "while they cry peace and safety." And thus does the awful hour of death, which consigns men over to judgment, so surprize the generality of men, while thoughtless and inattentive to this important event amidst all their daily warnings of it, that the day of their death comes upon them, like the day of judgment, "as a thief in the night."

C

night." And thus may the coming of Christ be coincident to the day of our death.

Bishop Law's commendation therefore of Dr. Taylor's hypothesis is perfectly just, and till the hypothesis be subverted by more cogent and convincing arguments than those which we have now recited, it must still remain to afford a solution to many difficulties which its opponent has advanced.

IV. The last place noticed in the Sermon before us is taken from the Epistle to the Hebrews, chap. x. 25. "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." We find the following translation of this passage, perhaps more elegant than faithful, in page 32 of the Sermon. "Not forgetting, as some habitually do, that awful season, in which we must all be convened before the tribunal of Christ, but exhorting each other to the practice of righteousness, and urging these admonitions with so much the more importunity, as ye see this solemn event approaching." This interpretation depends entirely upon the sense of the original words rendered *forsaking*, and *assembling ourselves together* in the vulgar translation. We are told that the words "εγκαταλειπω, and καταλειπω, occur three times in the Septuagint in the signification of

of *forgetting*." The passages alluded to, I believe, are Deut. xxxii. 18., and Isaiah xvii. 10. and xxiii. 15. In all which passages the sense will be precisely the same, whether we use the word *forsake* or *forget*. But I do not believe the word *εγκαταλείπω* is ever used in the Septuagint version in the absolute sense of *forget*. *Εγκαταλείπω* is used more than an hundred times in the Septuagint in the sense of *forsake*, which is the general use of the word, and is agreeable to the etymology of it. It is invariably used in this sense in the New Testament, and, what is very remarkable, St. Paul uses it entirely in this sense. See Rom. ix. 29., 2 Cor. iv. 9., 2 Tim. iv. 10. 16., Heb. xiii. 5. Little doubt therefore remains, which is the true meaning of the word *εγκαταλείπω*.

As to the word *ἐπισυναγωγή*, it is urged, that it is the same which St. Paul uses in speaking of the universal assembly of all nations at the day of retribution. But it seems to have been forgotten, that the different adjuncts may alter the meaning of the word. In Hebrews we have *ἐπισυναγωγή ἐαυτῶν*: in 2 Theff. ii. 1. *ἡμῶν ἐπισυναγωγῆς ἐπ' αὐτόν*. Surely the *assembling of ourselves together* (as by our own inclination), and the *assembling of us together unto him*, or, according to the vulgar translation, "our gathering together unto him" (as by some external power), must

signify very different things. Mr. Locke observes, that it is not uncommon for St. Paul to use the same word in sentences distant from each other in a very contrary sense.

The verb, from which the noun is derived, we find used in the New Testament, in the sense of, "to gather," "collect," "assemble," in Matt. xxiii. 37., Mark i. 33., Luke xii. 1. 13. 34. And the noun, without the preposition, originally signified an *assembly*, *synagogue*, or *congregation*, from which it was transferred to the *place* of assembling, and was usually taken in a sense synonymous to that in which we use the word Church. Beza thinks the auxiliary *ἐπι* was prefixed to distinguish a Christian church from a Jewish synagogue. The note of this learned man is so satisfactory and accurate that I beg leave to transcribe it here. "Addidi *mutuæ* epitheton partim propter reciprocum pronomen, partim perspicuitati studens. Nec enim dubium est quin de cœtibus ecclesiasticis istud intelligitur, quos subterfugiebant nonnulli propter aliorum Judæorum metum, sicut aliquandiu factitarunt Nicodemus, et Josephus Arimathæensis, ut infrà dicetur apertiùs, ver. 35 and 39. Noluit autem uti voce *συναγωγῆς*, ut Christianorum Ecclesiam à Judaicis Synagogis distingueret, quas isti potiùs frequentabant, in quos hæc reprehensio dirigitur: et addidit prepositionem
tionem

tionem *επι*, designans videlicet caput hujus aggregati cœtûs, nempe Christum, quem expressè nominat Paulus, 2 Theff. ii. 1.; quò spectant etiam Christi verba, Joan. xvii. 11." Vide Bežam in Heb. p. 681. Edit. Cant. 1642. And if the Hebrew version be admitted of any consequence, we find the words there perfectly agreeable to the sense which we have given of *εγκαταλείπω* and *επισυναγωγή*.

ושלא לעזוב את קהלתינו

From this critical examination of the words in dispute, there appears no reason why we should not admit the vulgar translation, especially if we consider the context, to which it is perfectly agreeable.

The design of this chapter is, to prove that the legal ceremonies could not by any means purify the conscience, and thence to argue the insufficiency of the Mosaic Law, and the necessity of looking beyond it. Thence the Apostle urges the Christian converts to improve the privileges of *their* High Priest, and covenant, incomparably more excellent than the Jewish, to the purposes of a fiducial approach to God, a constant attendance on his public worship (as purified by the Christian institution), and a benevolent regard for each other—to v. 26. It may be added, that the judicious and learned arch-deacon Paley has admitted this text as an

authority for public worship*, to which the Apostle exhorts the Hebrews, by informing them, that, as the end of the Jewish polity and jurisdiction was approaching, they would soon cease to be persecuted for this public profession of the faith.

It is to be observed, that the passage just examined corresponds with the following of St. Peter.—“ But the end of all things is at hand : be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer ;” (1 Pet. iv. 7.) if so, the explanation already given of the former may suffice to remove any objection arising from the latter. An obvious solution, however, we presume to offer of this difficulty, which is, by rendering the word *πᾶσι* as relating to persons, instead of things.

Our critic observes, in a note on Luke xxi. 31., that “ Dr. Sykes very readily allows, that by the *kingdom of God* we are here to understand its glorious state and perfection in a future world :” and, that “ any other interpretation would be utterly groundless.” But, I believe, it is very easy to prove, either that he has mistaken Dr. Sykes, or that Dr. Sykes is inconsistent with himself. The latter has endeavoured to prove, that the phrase, “ Kingdom of God,” refers to chapters ii. 44. and vii. 13, 14, of Daniel. It

* See Paley's Moral Philosophy, p. 355.

ought therefore to be proved, that the passages in Daniel were interpreted by the Jews in the sense in which he understands the parallel passage of St. Luke, before the construction which he gives it be allowed—which, I am persuaded, will be no easy task.

From a literal interpretation of the foregoing passages, where their figurative meaning suited not his hypothesis, and by a more liberal interpretation of others, of which the literal meaning suited it no better, our critic has erroneously concluded, “ that the Apostles expected in their own time *the end of the world and the appearance of Christ* :” a conclusion which, he says, is countenanced by the respectable authority of Mr. Locke. (Sermon, p. 35.)

Mr. Locke’s opinion is grounded on the several following passages of the apostolical writings: 1 Theff. iv. 15. and v. 6.; 1 Cor. i. 7., and vii. 29. 31., and x. 11.; Rom. xiii. 11, 12.; Heb. x. 37.

For complete satisfaction in this point, I beg leave to refer the reader to Mr. Locke’s paraphrase of these passages, by comparing which with the tenor of scripture, he will be enabled to decide for himself.

It may be worth while, however, to bestow a few remarks upon Mr. Locke’s opinion. On the passage to which our critic refers us, (2 Cor.

v. 3.) Beza observes, “ Nam quod hoc refert Castellio ad eos qui vivi in judicio deprehenduntur (de quibus 1 Theff. iv. 16) ne refutatione quidem mihi videtur indigere.”—Mr. Locke indeed observes, that “ the Apostle looked on the coming of Christ as not far off* ;” but it is not clear, that he considered the coming of Christ as synonymous to the “ end of the world:” as he has nowhere declared it, it seems to be taking his words in a very peculiar sense, to aver that such was his opinion. His note on the fourth verse of the 2 Cor. v. 3. seems absolutely inconsistent with such an opinion.

But whatever might be this great man’s opinion of this matter, it is somewhat remarkable, that he should omit to mention all the passages on which our critic has formed his opinion. It is equally remarkable, that, if Mr. Locke really held the opinion imputed to him, he should draw no conclusions from it similar to those which Dr. Edwards has drawn—that he should nowhere charge the Scriptures with such an obscurity as was a *considerable imperfection*, and even a *considerable error*, so directly as the latter has done. (See Sermon, p. 9, 10.) But it is still more remarkable, that the error with which the writers of the New Testament are charged

* Paraphrase on 2 Cor.

should not only have eluded the sagacity of so acute a reasoner as Mr. Locke, but of all the celebrated critics from the first age of christianity to the present day. Nor is it easy to account for those inveterate enemies to the gospel, the Jews, omitting to charge the Apostles with an error which might have obstructed the progress of the Christian cause, as it implied so much fallibility in it's advocates.—Did this error remain to be detected by the celebrated Mr. Gibbon, after escaping the censure of critics for more than seventeen centuries?—Let him not boast the triumph, “*Telum imbelli sine ictu conjecit.*”

An impartial review of the writings of the Apostles palpably contradicts the opinion that they expected the world to subsist but a few years longer. For whoever will be at the pains of examining their own simple history of themselves, will find, that, by founding churches on constitutions adapted to endure for ages, and, by the judicious appointment of successors, providing for the gradual propagation of a religion which comprehended very remote ages, they discovered no apprehension of universal judgment to take place within a short period, nor any expectation of the last and grand catastrophe of expiring nature. St. Paul speaks of his own death as very near (2 Tim. iv. 6.), and therefore

fore could not expect this awful event in his own time, and also predicts other events which are totally incompatible with any expectation of an approaching dissolution of the world. So far indeed from this Apostle's expecting the end of the world in his own time, he plainly intimates that it was to endure for many ages.—“ God,” says he, “ hath raised us up together, that in the *ages to come*, he might show the exceeding riches of his grace.” (Ephes. ii. 6, 7.) The events also which he foretold corroborate our opinion, that he conceived the world would endure for many ages, viz. the casting away of the Jews, their long continuance in unbelief, and their future restoration, together with the fulness of the Gentiles.

Upon the whole then, it becomes every serious reader most earnestly to consider, whether a necessary obscurity in the delivery of a prophecy, and a bare possibility of a mistake arising from it to those to whom it was immediately delivered, can be of weight enough to counterbalance the credit of the gospel history, derived from the exact completion of other prophecies, as well as the incontestible evidence of miracles, of which the gospel is an authentic history, and the certainty that the writers of it were directed by the infallible spirit of truth. For if
it

it be granted, that our Saviour prophecied in such terms as necessarily occasioned a *considerable error* in the Apostles, by which the gospel becomes chargeable with imperfection—the truth of our religion must, in either case, be greatly invalidated—for it would be impossible to prove, that any revelation which is erroneous or imperfect could be derived from the source of infinite perfection and infallibility—the providence of God in protecting and defending this work of his wisdom, being necessarily supposed analogous to that exercised over all his other works. In vain therefore are we called upon (p. 35), “most earnestly to consider, whether the real interests of Christianity would not be more essentially promoted by conceding the objection that the Apostles expected in their own time the end of the world and the coming of Christ”—and therefore were in a *considerable error*. In vain are we told, that we need not be apprehensive that any injurious consequences will arise from the concession, or that an ingenious professor (the bishop of Landaff) very readily acknowledges, the Apostles might surely be proper witnesses of the life and resurrection of Jesus, though they were ignorant of the precise time when he would come to judge the world.” For it is too obvious to need any proof, that if the Apostles were under a *considerable error*, and
that

fore could not expect this awful event in his own time, and also predicts other events which are totally incompatible with any expectation of an approaching dissolution of the world. So far indeed from this Apostle's expecting the end of the world in his own time, he plainly intimates that it was to endure for many ages.—“ God,” says he, “ hath raised us up together, that in the *ages to come*, he might show the exceeding riches of his grace.” (Ephes. ii. 6, 7.) The events also which he foretold corroborate our opinion, that he conceived the world would endure for many ages, viz. the casting away of the Jews, their long continuance in unbelief, and their future restoration, together with the fulness of the Gentiles.

Upon the whole then, it becomes every serious reader most earnestly to consider, whether a necessary obscurity in the delivery of a prophecy, and a bare possibility of a mistake arising from it to those to whom it was immediately delivered, can be of weight enough to counterbalance the credit of the gospel history, derived from the exact completion of other prophecies, as well as the incontestible evidence of miracles, of which the gospel is an authentic history, and the certainty that the writers of it were directed by the infallible spirit of truth. For if
it

it be granted, that our Saviour prophesied in such terms as necessarily occasioned a *considerable error* in the Apostles, by which the gospel becomes chargeable with imperfection—the truth of our religion must, in either case, be greatly invalidated—for it would be impossible to prove, that any revelation which is erroneous or imperfect could be derived from the source of infinite perfection and infallibility—the providence of God in protecting and defending this work of his wisdom, being necessarily supposed analogous to that exercised over all his other works. In vain therefore are we called upon (p. 35), “most earnestly to consider, whether the real interests of Christianity would not be more essentially promoted by conceding the objection that the Apostles expected in their own time the end of the world and the coming of Christ”—and therefore were in a *considerable error*. In vain are we told, that we need not be apprehensive that any injurious consequences will arise from the concession, or that an ingenious professor (the bishop of Landaff) very readily acknowledges, the Apostles might surely be proper witnesses of the life and resurrection of Jesus, though they were ignorant of the precise time when he would come to judge the world.” For it is too obvious to need any proof, that if the Apostles were under a *considerable error*, and
that

that error was derived from the Teacher of their religion, they might also be liable to considerable error in teaching that religion to mankind—and even the Author of it himself would be chargeable with the most palpable contradictions, if, after promising to send them the “spirit of truth, who should guide them into all truth,” those to whom the spirit was already sent, were still subject to *considerable error*.—And, indeed, the consequence of such an error may well be inferred from the anxiety with which St. Paul labours to convince his Thessalonian converts, that they ought not to expect the final judgment as an event nearly approaching—and it may fairly be supposed, that the Apostles would not easily fall into an error of such consequence, after being so fully aware of it—and having used so solemn an adjuration in guarding the Thessalonians against so material an error. (2 Theff. ii. 1.)

If, therefore, such are the consequences of conceding the objection, that the Apostles expected in their own time the consummation of all things—the appearance of Christ, and the end of the world; it becomes those who urge it, to give more solid and convincing proofs that the Apostles did actually expect so awful a change both in the material and moral world, during their own existence, than the uncertain
evidence

evidence of disputable authorities, however ingeniously supported by the aids of learning and criticism. To myself, indeed, the proofs urged by our learned Critic, are far from being satisfactory. How far they are invalidated by the preceding examination of them must be left to the candid reader to decide. But when it is considered, that we have all the evidence possible to be given, that the revelation of the Christian religion proceeded from God;—that the records of it were dictated by his infallible Spirit;—and preserved by his Providence;—we cannot suppose, that it can contain the smallest imperfection or error, however the artful machinations of it's enemies may seem to have sullied it's original purity. For it must be allowed, that the Christian religion proves the Jewish to have remained perfect itself, notwithstanding different sects among the Jews had corrupted it's precepts by their traditions—and though they had taught for doctrines the commandments of men, yet the commandment of God remained *Holy, Just, and Good*.

But when we further consider the figurative style in which the Author of the prophecy, which has been the subject of the preceding pages, was accustomed to speak—the nature of prophecy itself—the utter impossibility of comprehending the full import of every expression
in

in a language long since obsolete, and, however carefully studied, not familiarly understood—and that the language in which it now stands recorded, is not the original language in which the prophecy was delivered—the strong presumption against our Saviour's predicting an event which he (as only a wise and good man in the estimation of his worst enemies) must perceive was not likely to happen within the limits assigned for its accomplishment—and above all, the reasons why some parts of it should be obscurely uttered—we cannot be too cautious in supposing our Saviour to have predicted what was not accomplished within the time intended, which would inevitably impeach the credit of his religion. To which considerations it may be added, how far more probable it is that we should be mistaken in some few expressions contained in the epistolary writings, naturally obscure, and said, by one of their writers *, to be "hard to be understood"—than that the Apostles should have misapprehended their divine Master, and thereby have perpetuated a *considerable error*, which must impeach, if not destroy that authority, by which they were commissioned to preach the gospel to all nations, and must render their own authority very precarious.

* St. Peter.

Upon these considerations the following hypothesis may probably be preferred to the inevitable consequences of admitting the Apostles to have erred in so essential a point.

HYPOTHESIS.

Our Saviour, in this prophecy, defines the time of the desolation of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Jewish polity; but intends not to define the limits prescribed to the duration of the world. In metaphors and figures agreeable to the ancient prophets, he describes the prognosticating signs of the destruction of Jerusalem, from verse 3 to 28. The prophecy opens with foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem, by describing the remote signs of it's approach, from verse 3 to 14—whence our Lord proceeds to describe the nearer signs of this calamitous event, and the extreme severity of those unparalleled sufferings which should be inflicted on the Jews, to verse 28. He thence proceeds to describe the total destruction of the Jewish state by strong figures, many of which are allusive to the day of judgment—the former of which events he declares shall be accomplished within the generation then existing—but as to the latter, at verse 36 (to which the figures used in the description of the former naturally

naturally led him), with consummate wisdom and integrity, he intimates that it was no part of his commission to declare the time of it—but concludes the discourse, by exhorting his hearers to such a vigilant preparation, as would suit the accomplishment of either of these two important events—the latter of which he describes in another discourse, recorded in the next chapter.

However exceptionable this hypothesis may appear to those who object to the infallibility of the scriptures, the obscurity of the prophecy in Matt. xxiv., or in any part of the epistolary writings; it is at least more supported by scriptural authority than that which I have been endeavouring to subvert—which seems to depend on verbal criticism, sometimes ingenious, but often erroneous; or, on authorities sometimes respectable, but often vague and precarious.

Without any wish to impose these Strictures upon the world, as the decisions of a dogmatist, I shall conclude them with an earnest wish, that they may be read with the same reverence for the scriptures with which they have been written, and with the same assurance, that men may err in the search of truth, but that God can never err in the revelation of it.

F I N I S.

